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Elimination by Design

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Dominantly, designers and architects who are preoccupied with 'sustainability' strive to realise their objective by designing artefacts and built structures with reduced environmental impacts. To a lesser extent they are also a concerned with retrofitting existing products and buildings. One has to see such activity in the context of (i) globalisation, with its continual expansion of urban environments, the production of goods and consumerism, (ii) the fact that 'sustainable' artefacts and structures only represent a very small segment of what is available in the market. In fact a large percentage of the 'sustainable' commodities are merely meeting the demands of environmentally sensitive niche markets. Moreover, even with significant improvements in 'unit' environmental performance, overall growth in market volume means that gross negative environmental impacts will continue to increase.

To design 'environmentally improved' versions of existing products or buildings will not deliver a condition of sustainment. This is because current 'practices and products of 'sustainability' just cannot displace

the sheer mass of the unsustainable. At best, all that can be argued is that with the full weight of market forces, they will gradually replace the mass of everything that defutures.

Rather than create more 'green' things that simply add to 'consumer choice' – houses, cars, shirts, shoes, breakfast cereals, lawnmowers, carpets etc. – the imperative is the elimination, by design, of the unsustainable. This is what will advance the prospect of an 'age of sustainment'.

Clearly such elimination requires an enormous design effort. However, partly the project has already started – a considerable amount of thought and work is being invested in replacing products by services. This shift is totally counter to 'capital logic' whereby products displace services (bread-making machines displacing bakeries, washing machines displacing laundries and vending machines displacing shops). For elimination by design to really become effective it needs to pursued very aggressively. The overall quantity of the unsustainable just has to be dramatically reduced. It is not a question of finding replacement but rather displacement. Likewise, many objects of desire have to be exposed to strategies for transforming them into the absolutely undesirable. To do this there has to be a focus 'sustainment benefit' whereby real qualitative gains are brought within reach – this in contrast to try to persuade with moral argument.

Clearly it has taken a long time to accumulate all the 'stuff' that blocks our path to sustainment, and it's going to take a long time to selectively eliminate it. Obviously this is no mere mechanical exercise but one that requires constructive acts of 'clearing', allowing us to identify what really matters to us so we may be sustained spiritually, symbolically, intellectually as well as physically.

Equally, through its clearing function, elimination design has the potential to provide a means whereby 'already existing sustain-able design' can reveal itself. What is being identified here is the plethora of often common and overlooked made objects and built forms that have historically demonstrated an ability, in the right hands, to sustain. There are many starting points to think such things – tools that conserve materials in use, rather than deplete them as a resource; technologies that improve human and animal fitness rather than reduce it; structures that perform their function with modesty rather than with excess; products that retain their utility and symbolic value over the lives of their users. The very act of naming and gaining a consensus on what is listed, is an opening affirmative action In this respect, the recovery implicit in 'bringing design to sustainment' is a recovery, understood as both a retrieval and a coming back to health.

Seeking the sustain-able from what already is, in contrast to constantly making the new, needs to be seen in the frames of

dematerialisation (the shift to services) and rematerialisation (acts of re-design and re-engineering that bring technologies back into an ecology of sustaining labour. Rematerialisation can be explored in many directions. It can be based upon the recovery and the reinvention of past material practices. It can replace energy intensive and environmentally damaging machines with newly conceived hand tools that may be simple or those which are sophisticated and which amplify the mechanics of the human body. Equally this kind of rematerialisation can regenerate work as a domain of reconceptualised craft and pleasure (by eliminating work simply as operational tasks and reinstating the education of the hand and the eye), work as health-improving (by reducing or eliminating sedentary activity in office, factory or on farms without a return to physical exploitation) and work as caring for one's natural or artificial environment. Likewise physical activities can be re-introduced to reduce the use of chemicals in the home and in agriculture. None of these advocated practices rest with a romantic and historicist view of labour, but rather have to be contemporary reconstructions able to engage the damaged worlds in which we live.

While only outlined schematically two claims can be made: first, elimination design is not a recipe for economic disaster but the reverse (this as a key element in the construction of means to create wealth by overcoming the unsustainable while effecting a paradigmatic shift in economy that is predicated upon moving from growth to a reinvented quality model): and, second, it is project (with immediate conceptual and practical potential) that has the ability to transform design and architecture and break the bonds to the fetishisation of design, dysfunctional divisions of ego-centric labour, and service-provider passivity.